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Lessons from the War in Afghanistan

Part I. Introduction

Purpose

(U) This study provides lessons derived from the Soviet war in Afghanistan which may be applicable to the training of US Army soldiers and units. Every effort was made to address low-level tactical problems, although the intelligence summaries and other accounts published during the course of the war tended to focus on higher level matters. Still, in order to appreciate the problem of fighting the Soviet Army at the tactical level, there is much to be learned from these accounts.

Background

"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant."

(Harry G. Summers, ON STRATEGY)

"No Soviet garrison or major outpost was ever overrun."

(General-Lieutenant Gromov,  
last commander of the Soviet  
40th Army in Afghanistan)

(U) By 15 February 1980, the Soviet Union had withdrawn its last combat forces from Afghanistan, bringing to an end nine years of combat experience. This was for the USSR a "Low Intensity Conflict," a "foreign internal defense" against a "loosely organized insurgency."

(U) After the Afghan communist coup in April 1978, uprisings against the new government occurred in several areas of the country. Soviet economic and military aid became a major source of Afghan government support. By the Fall of 1979, however, it became clear that government forces were unable to overcome the growing insurgency in the countryside. Although several thousand Soviet military advisors (and some combat units) were already in Afghanistan by late 1979, the introduction of major Soviet units in late December of that year marked the beginning of what was to

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become for the Soviets their first major military campaign outside the Warsaw Pact bloc since 1945, and the longest war in Soviet history.

(U) The Soviets installed in power a new Afghan communist leader, Babrak Karmal, and hoped to shore up the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (later renamed the Republic of Afghanistan) military to the point where it could control the insurgency. What was clearly perceived by the insurgents as a foreign invasion, however, further inflamed the situation. What had earlier been a disjointed 'Jihad' (Holy War) against the communist government in Kabul, now took on greater urgency and served as the strongest unifying factor for the insurgents. As one Soviet news commentator remarked in the newspaper IZVESTIYA in late 1988, "The Afghan people now had invading infidels against whom to unite." Due to this, and the continuing ineffectiveness of the Afghan Army, the Soviets were compelled to go over to the offensive. But no Soviet textbook had prepared them for the tactical problems of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.

(U) While the insurgency reflected the classic threat--no fixed battle lines; low technology insurgent warfare; small, short duration insurgent targets--several factors gave the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan a unique set of characteristics. For one, the Kremlin obviously imposed limitations on the size of the Soviet force deployment. There would be no significant build-up in force strength. The Soviet name for their forces in Afghanistan, "Limited Contingent," was as real as it was propagandistic. This had a significant effect on the conduct of operations: insufficient forces were available to expand appreciably 40th Army's area of physical control, or to identify and attack many insurgent targets at the same time. When major operations were conducted in one part of the country, forces had to be drawn from other areas, leaving those areas vulnerable to insurgent activities. Moreover, early in the war, especially

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after Brezhnev's death, Soviet leaders apparently assigned a high priority to minimizing personnel and equipment losses. This in turn caused Soviet operations to exhibit an unusual degree of caution and lack of boldness when employing troops at the tactical level.

(U) Other factors influencing the nature of the Afghan War were:

- Geographic proximity to the USSR, with direct access to well-developed and secure Soviet internal LOCs
- Rugged, desolate terrain where movement was limited to a few established routes and often difficult to conceal
- Deep-rooted religious and tribal/regional divisions among both the client and insurgent forces in an environment where there was no well-developed traditional sense of nationalism.
- Primitive nature of the Afghan economic infrastructure and extremely limited LOCs

(U) These objectives and characteristics created a combat environment very different from the European war scenario against NATO which the conscript-based Soviet Armed Forces were trained and equipped to fight. Afghanistan was not a high-intensity war fought by large armored and air forces, with massed formations penetrating deep into enemy rear areas to strike a crippling blow at the enemy's ability to resist. Instead, the 40th Army settled into bases along the primary LOCs and near key cities and towns. It found itself in a protracted war, albeit often intense and at a high tempo, fought at the tactical level, where two-thirds of its forces were committed to resupply or defensive security missions. The elusive insurgents were dispersed throughout the country. With no railways, logistic support for 40th Army and the Afghan economy depended primarily on the sparse, exposed road network, creating a constant, but unavoidable Soviet vulnerability.

## Applicability of the Lessons

(U) As a consequence of the special nature of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, lessons derived from the conflict fall into three categories:

### Insurgency

Since we recognize that the support of insurgencies is sometimes in the interests of the United States, lessons from the

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Mujahideen experience can be applied by U.S. organizations and units which support and train insurgent forces.

Counterinsurgency

Many lessons from the Soviet COIN experience will appear very familiar to students of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. They represent many of the tactical dilemmas found in any COIN operation. Soviet failure to learn from the U.S. and other applicable COIN experiences caused them to make many of the same errors.

Soviet Army in Combat

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Part II. Insurgency

Mujahideen Strengths

(U) Many Mujahideen strengths were common to most insurgent movements. These included:

- Familiarity with the terrain
- Tactical mobility
- Ability to achieve surprise
- Ability to operate at night
- Large manpower pool to maintain their numbers

To these must be added the fact that the Mujahideen were unusually rugged and highly motivated fighters. This motivation stemmed from the historic dislike for foreign occupiers, as well as from the religious fervor accompanying the 'Jihad' declared first against the communist Afghan government, and then against the Soviet invaders. The Mujahideen had sanctuaries in Pakistan and Iran and received significant outside material support. For the most part, they enjoyed the support of the Afghan people, although this was sometimes only local. (Some villages insisted on remaining neutral in order to avoid having their homes and fields become battle grounds. Others were actively in league with the communist government.)

Mujahideen Weaknesses

(U) The most glaring weaknesses in the insurgency were:

- No unified leadership or strategic planning
- Sporadic outbreaks of intergroup violence (which subsided somewhat during the course of the war)
- Marginal training base
- Limited firepower
- Difficult logistics
- Limited communications

Mujahideen groups often associated themselves with political organizations in Pakistan or Iran, primarily for the purpose of acquiring weapons, supplies, and intelligence, or as a means for appealing to international sources of assistance. Regional and tribal loyalties, however, complicated these relationships.

(U) Paradoxically, some of what we might perceive to be strategic weaknesses became strengths at the operational and tactical levels. For example, the Mujahideen's disunified

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political leadership often worked to keep the Soviets from infiltrating and eliminating their leadership. Likewise, disorganization in planning turned out to be a strength of sorts: the Soviets could not intercept Mujahideen plans because they simply did not exist, except for local, short-range ones. Flamboyant individual actions, dispersal into small elements, decentralized leadership and spontaneous operations decreased tactical predictability and presented few large-scale targets for the Soviets and the government army.

(U) Although the Mujahideen were inclined to attack any nearby target, regardless of its significance, and often tended to fight only within their local areas, there were some notable (albeit rare) exceptions. The legendary commander in the Panjsher Valley, Ahmet Shah Masood, finally gave up attempts to defend his valley. Instead, he organized and trained Mujahideen groups to attack strategically vital approaches throughout the Hindu-Kush mountains. According to some eyewitnesses, Masood was skilled in the use of speed, surprise and deception. His men were reportedly so experienced in such tactics that they were more than a match for the Soviet elite troops who frequently made forays into the mountain areas.

(U) It is important to keep in mind throughout this study that the term Mujahideen is a name given to all the fighters in the Jihad. It does not imply that there were 'Mujahideen tactics,' or even ways of circulating among all the insurgent groups lessons learned from the on-going struggle against the Soviet forces in their country. Where a tactic proved successful, it may have been successful only to the group used in the example. And this success may have been the result of the individual commander's skills. When a tactic failed, it may have been due to bad intelligence or just plain bad luck. Additionally, many of the accounts of combat between Mujahideen and the Soviet/government forces come to us second or third-hand and are occasionally exaggerated or colored by political motives. Likewise, we do not or cannot always identify when

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certain combat actions occurred. Obviously there were improvements on both sides as the war progressed. Mujahideen success was closely linked to the amount and types of weapons and ammunition they had at their disposal. This varied considerably in different areas and at different times. Nonetheless, the Mujahideen validated several basic tenets of insurgency warfare against overwhelmingly superior conventional forces.

(U) Many of the lessons given below apply to scenarios where traditional guerrilla tactics must be used against conventional forces. US Army advisors or training teams supporting an insurgency may find them relevant when working with fiercely independent, basically uneducated peasant or urban fighters in a diverse ethnic or political environment.

#### Tactical Lessons from the Mujahideen Experience

LESSON: Do not provide COIN forces with large, lucrative targets.

(U) As the number of insurgents increase, leaders may be tempted to organize them into larger units, with larger and more permanent base camps. Although this presents certain obvious advantages in command and control (C2) and logistics, it diminishes one of the principle strengths of an insurgency; namely, dispersal into small and more mobile targets. One would think this is not a lesson which needs to be learned over and over. But in dealing with insurgent leaders who have no professional training, or who have no previous experience against large conventional forces, learning this lesson early will avoid needless losses.

#### Examples

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LESSON: Know the enemy's tactics and routines.

(U) Strict adherence to doctrine or even repetition of innovative tactics is a common characteristic of conventional forces with little experience in COIN warfare. Insurgent forces can exploit this weakness if they are familiar with the conventional doctrine or COIN force practices. Such knowledge can provide advance warning of COIN forces intentions and allow insurgents to predict COIN tactics.

Example

LESSON: Be aware of personal and group rivalries and conflicts.

(U) In many insurgencies there are likely to be conflicts between the goals of various fighting groups, or between their leaders. Although they may often cooperate against a common foe, it is likely that each group or leader will seek ways to maximize his own interests while minimizing those of his opponents. This can lead to, at a minimum, tenuous C2 relationships between various groups combined for combat.

Example

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Convoy Ambushes

(U) Although ambushes are common to most insurgencies, the Mujahideen had several distinct advantages. First, the terrain often presented poor off-road trafficability. Second, there were no railroads, which led to the Soviet practice of using ground convoys for most of their supply efforts. This, combined with the traditionally poor march discipline of Soviet drivers, presented the Mujahideen with frequent and lucrative ambush targets. Successful tactics employed by the Mujahideen were as follows:

LESSON: Locate and destroy vehicle marshalling areas.

Examples

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Intelligence and Security

LESSON: Take full advantage of the cultural and linguistic identities between insurgent and government personnel.

(U) In most insurgencies, the common ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of both sides presents great opportunities for infiltration of the enemy force. The Mujahideen had a large number of informants in the government army who provided information used for both defensive and offensive operations. (It was more difficult for government agents to infiltrate the Mujahideen, as the insurgents operated in small groups and generally knew each other personally.)

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#### Air Defense

(U) Defense against Soviet air attacks was of critical importance to the insurgents. Attack helicopter escorts and quick reaction fixed-wing strikes caused great damage to the Mujahideen. The insurgents found it necessary to move in small groups, and at night. For the first several years of the war, in addition to limited use of the SA-7 and heavy machine guns (HMG), there were some effective passive countermeasures against Soviet air: dispersal, cover and knowledge of the terrain.

LESSON: Position base camps so as to reduce the effectiveness of air attacks.

#### Example

(U) In the Jagdalek Valley a typical base camp would be tucked into a crease between two ridges of a mountain with steep slopes rising on three sides. Heavy machine guns were placed near the crests of surrounding hills in emplacements chiseled out of the rock, with bomb shelters to protect gunners. There were more emplacements than guns so that the guns could be moved to different positions. The base camp typically had an ammunition bunker and bomb shelters, chiseled out by portable jackhammers.

(U) If an airstrike came over the mountain ridge, bombs and rockets which had to be released after clearing one hill, most

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likely would drift over the site at the bottom of the crease and hit the side of the opposite hill. If a jet or helicopter tried to fly up the crease between the ridges, it had to fly broadside past the machine guns. Even if a helicopter used a stand-off weapon system, considering that the base camp was dug perpendicular into the side face of the crease, a direct hit that would produce extreme damage was very unlikely.

(U) If a ground assault accompanied an air attack, the Soviets would have to fight uphill on foot towards insurgents in concealed positions. The Soviets were reluctant to pay the costs of this kind of ground sweep. A more favored Soviet tactic was to air-assault troops onto the best available landing zone (frequently a mountain top or ridge line), surround a base camp and fight downhill. The Mujahideen could counter this tactic by having many small base camps rather than one large one in an area. If the Soviets surrounded any one camp, the remaining camps were able to counterattack the Soviets. If the Soviets conducted a truly massive ground sweep, or if the Mujahideen found themselves without adequate weapons or ammunition, they simply exfiltrated.

LESSON: Know the effects of terrain on air rescue.

Example

(U) A particularly gutsy act on the part of the Mujahideen demonstrated their knowledge of the terrain. The broken surface and mixture of colors of the terrain sometimes made observation from the air of small features very difficult. Air reconnaissance often relied on movement to sight targets on the ground. Thus, the Mujahideen in the Jagdalek Valley developed the tactic of freezing whenever aircraft flew over. They had disciplined themselves to become immediately still at the first sight of an aircraft, even when in the open and very near cover.

LESSON: The use of light-weight, easily operated surface-to-air missiles (SAM) help to overcome the massive fire superiority usually characteristic of COIN forces.

Examples

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Part III. Counterinsurgency

Soviet Objectives

(U) Rather than being an 'invasion,' the introduction of Soviet combat forces in December 1979 was an 'intervention' in a COIN effort which had begun shortly after the Afghan Communist Party coup in April 1978. The USSR sent its forces into Afghanistan primarily for the purpose of taking over security responsibilities, so that government forces could concentrate on putting down the ever-growing insurgency. Thus the initial Soviet objectives were to:

- Control the cities and towns
- Secure the major lines of communications (LOC)
- Train and equip government forces

(U) As the insurgency expanded and the Afghan Army proved inadequate to the task, the Soviet 'Limited Contingent' in Afghanistan soon found itself enmeshed in full-fledged COIN operations. Thus, by mid-1980, the Soviets acquired the following additional missions:

- Eliminate insurgent centers
- Separate insurgents from the population
- Deny by interdiction outside aid and sanctuary

Nonetheless, this 'low-intensity conflict' was to be conducted with a minimum of losses in personnel and equipment. As pointed out above, there would be no significant troop buildup, nor great expansion of the logistics and transportation infrastructures. The Soviets partially succeeded in only the first three of the above missions.

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### Battlefield Operating Systems

(U) This section on COIN lessons is organized around the US Army's Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS). The BOS are the major systems a commander and his staff must synchronize in all types of combat. As described in FM 100-15 (Coordinating Draft, January 1988), the BOS appear most appropriate to corps operations. However, to the extent they are responsive to lower level commanders, BOS also make up the essential elements of planning and execution for division, brigade, battalion and company level combat.

### Command and Control

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LESSON: Decentralize planning and execution of low-level operations.

Example

LESSON: Train battalion commanders and staffs to operate with combined arms task forces.

Example

#### Maneuver

(U) Soviet efforts to place their forces at an advantage over the Mujahideen were fraught with all the limitations associated with a large, mechanized army facing a low-tech insurgency. Moreover, maneuver of combat forces in Afghanistan was severely restricted by terrain and limited road networks. Based on the Soviets' experience, we can draw the following lessons:

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LESSON: Use dismounted infantry or air assault teams to identify and destroy antitank ambushes.

Example

LESSON: Constantly review and reassess the effectiveness of tactics being applied against insurgent forces.

Example

LESSON: Use smoke as a defensive measure when caught in an ambush.

Example

(U) Soviet units often carried smoke grenades with them which were used to screen escape during Mujahideen ambushes.

Fire Support

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Helicopters

(U) The most significant development in air support for Soviet ground operations in Afghanistan was their use of armed helicopters.

LESSON: Helicopter operations at night require extensive training and familiarity with the terrain.

Examples

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(U) According to several Soviet sources, logistic support in Afghanistan was unsatisfactory. In any case, they seem to have never run out of ammunition or POL, although there were many shortfalls in various combat service support items. One of their biggest problems was transportation. Afghanistan has a very poor transportation infrastructure. There are no railroads or waterways which can be used to transport supplies. Roads are bad, cross very rugged terrain (sometimes allowing only one-way traffic), and the Mujahideen frequently ambushed surface convoys.

LESSON: Use air transport whenever possible.

Example

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#### Air Defense

(U) There was no air threat to Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

#### Chemical

LESSON: Develop countermeasures and train to defend against chemical agents under special conditions (e.g. mountain, desert, arctic terrain).

#### Examples

(U) Attacks with chemical/toxin weapons against the Mujahideen in Afghanistan were reported as early as 6 months before the Soviet invasion on 27 December 1979. For the period from the summer of 1979 until the summer of 1981, the US government received reports of 47 separate toxic agent attacks with a death toll of more than 3000. More recent circumstantial evidence indicated the Soviets may have continued the selective use of toxic agents in Afghanistan. A variety of agents and delivery systems were reportedly used. Fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters usually were said to be employed to disseminate

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agents in rockets, bombs and sprays. Landmines containing toxic agents also were reported. However, none of these reports can be substantiated.

LESSON: Target Soviet chemical defense equipment.

Example

(U) Soviet decontamination equipment is mounted on trucks and thus presents a soft target.

LESSON: Prepare troops to encounter flame/incendiary weapons.

Example

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Part IV. Soviet Army in Combat/ Conclusion

(U) What general conclusions can be drawn from the Soviet Army experience in Afghanistan? What will be the effect on the Soviet Army of the combat experience gained by thousands of Soviet soldiers? How well did the Soviets adjust to the special conditions of their war? How well did the Soviet soldier perform? The Soviet officer? How will the Soviets approach the 'lessons learned' from their War?

Limited Goals. Limited Commitment

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(U) Soviet officers are very highly trained in their branches and specialties. One of the most important obligations placed on a Soviet officer is that of being able to train subordinates. Glasnost, or 'openness,' which is very real in Soviet society, has penetrated the Soviet Army. There are numerous accounts of younger veteran officers speaking out against training practices which do not accord with their own real combat experiences. We must conclude, then, that for the next several years, the combat experience gained by Soviet officers in Afghanistan will have a significant impact on the quality of training in the Soviet Army. Although Soviet doctrine may not reflect major changes based on the experience in Afghanistan, tactical skills, as well as organizational and specialized skills in combat support and combat service support areas, should be enhanced.

Adaptability

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(U) Still, there were instances in Afghanistan where <sup>505</sup> tactical commanders demonstrated quick thinking. For example, on

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a raid to destroy a Mujahideen ammunition storage area, whose location deep in the mountains had been revealed by an Afghan informer, a Soviet battalion commander discovered that his Afghan guide was apparently lost. Remembering that a short distance back, some rockets had been fired at his unit, but apparently had been very wide of the mark, the Soviet commander decided to return to the impact area. He reasoned that the rockets were probably pre-registered on the route to the ammunition storage area. When he arrived back at the rocket impact area, his guide became reoriented and the mission continued in the right direction.

Soviet Lessons Learned

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a. (U) Initially the Mujahideen were forced to fight with only small arms and machine guns up to 12.7mm.

c. (U) By the middle of the war, the Mujahideen possessed RPG-2 and 7, 82mm mortar . 75mm recoilless rifle, and 107mm and 122mm free rockets.

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**U. S. ARMY  
COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF COLLEGE**

**AFGHANISTAN  
LESSONS LEARNED  
PROJECT**

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**MISSION**

- Research:**
- Screen Intel Summaries (80-88)
  - Extract Low-Level Lessons
- Trip:**
- Collect Additional Information
  - Report Findings as Lessons Learned
- Product:**
- CSI Combine Info into Single Lessons Learned Pamphlet

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**UNIQUENESS OF AFGHAN WAR**

- Limited Soviet Objectives
- Rugged Terrain
- Nature of the Enemy

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**BRIEFING SEQUENCE**

- Mujahideen Organization and C2
  - Tactics
- Soviet Organization and C2
  - Tactics
- Impact on Soviet Army
- Overall Lessons
  - Tactics
  - Operations
  - Strategy
- Recommendations

**MUJAHIDEEN ORGANIZATION AND C2**

- Diverse Tribal Society
- No Centralized Control
- Local Commander
- Influence from Pakistan

**SUCCESSFUL MUJAHIDEEN TACTICS**

- Engage by Fire at Max Range
- Hit and Run
- Mines

**AIR DEFENSE**

- Small Arms
- Heavy Machine Guns
- RPG
- SA-7
- BLOWPIPE
- STINGER



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**STINGER**

- Increased Kills
- Spooked Pilots
- Enhanced Effectiveness of Other Weapons
- Raised Mujahideen Morale
- Increased Motor Transport

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**SOVIET OBJECTIVES**

- Initially (Dec 79)
  - Control the Cities and Towns
  - Secure Major LOCs and Key Installations
  - Train and Equip Government Forces
- Soon Thereafter (Mid-1980)
  - Eliminate Insurgent Centers
  - Separate Insurgents from the Population
  - Deny by Interdiction Outside Aid and Refuge

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**ORGANIZATION OF SOVIET 40TH ARMY**

- Motorized Rifle Divisions (No Tank Divs)
- Non-Standard Units
  - Airborne
  - Spetsnaz
  - Motorized Rifle Brigade
- Air

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**OVERALL COMMAND AND CONTROL**

- Complex**
  - General Staff**

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## **LARGE-SCALE OFFENSIVE TACTICS**

- Multi-Battalion / Division Level**
- Well Executed**
- Not Successful**
  - Security Leaks**
  - Predictable**
  - Return to Garrison**

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**SMALL-SCALE OFFENSIVE TACTICS**

- **Cordon and Search**
- **Raids**
- **Air Assault**

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**DEFENSE**

- Mines**
- Supporting Fires**
- Never Overrun by  
Mujahideen**

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**COUNTER-AMBUSH TACTICS**

- Terrain
- Artillery
- Air
- Preemptive Ambush
- Punitive Air Strike



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## **ANTI-STINGER MEASURES**

- **Changes in Air Tactics**
  - **Higher Altitudes**
  - **Prep Fires at Pre-Dawn Only**
  - **Gunships on Standby**
  - **Nap of the Earth**
- **Flares**
- **Increase in Fixed-Wing**
- **Increase in Artillery and MLRS**

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**FIRE SUPPORT**

- Artillery
- Helicopters
- Fixed-Wing Aircraft
- Forward Air Controllers

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**MINE WARFARE**

- One of Biggest Developments of War
- 30 Million Plus Mines Employed
- Poor Record Keeping

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**LOGISTICS**

- System Worked**
- Harsh Conditions**

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**SOVIET PROBLEM AREAS**  
**IN AFGHANISTAN**

**- Not Prepared for Counterinsurgency**

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**COMMAND & CONTROL**

- Too Centralized
- Mission vs. Fear

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## TACTICAL FAILINGS

- Training
- Recognize What Works
- Lack of Aggressiveness

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## INTELLIGENCE

- Lacked Timeliness
- Relied Excessively on COMINT

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**MEDICAL SUPPORT**

- Casualty Management Inadequate
- Disease Control Inadequate
  - 15,000 Cases of Hepatitis

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**IMPACT ON THE SOVIET ARMY**

- Tradition of Lessons Learned
  - Soviet Open Press
- 500,000 Personnel Served
  - 33,000 Officers
- Testing Ground for Weapons

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## TACTICAL LESSONS

- Fire Support
- Mines
- Limited Applicability
  - Centralized C & C
  - Lack of Aggressiveness

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## **OPERATIONAL LESSONS**

- Light Forces**
- Resupply**
- Integration of All Arms**
- Outside Support**

**MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS ?**

- Political
- Strategic

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. In-depth Research of Intel Holdings.**
- 2. Delay Making Another Trip Until Situation Stabilizes.**
- 3. Review Tactical Literature.**
- 4. Examine Issue of Support of Insurgency Through Third Parties.**